

MCALLISTER'S DUEL

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IT was shortly after the Civil War, said Captain Lan-yard, who told a lot of us this story, that the thing happened. Dueling had almost entirely disappeared as a method of settling personal differences in the navy; but occasionally some hotheaded youngsters would indulge in coffee and pistols for two, early in the morning on a convenient beach. Nothing serious ever resulted from these appeals to a discarded code, so far as I know, and the lads usually returned on board ship the best of friends for life.

I was third watch officer of the *Ossawatomie* in the old South Pacific Squadron. A fine frigate she was, in every sense of the word, and all hands from the Captain down were exceedingly proud of her. For myself, I greatly enjoyed my cruise, so far as my duty and a host of kind-hearted, hospitable acquaintances on shore were concerned; but I had little pleasure afloat when not actually pacing the deck, drilling my nine-inch guns, or exercising with spars and sails. My messmates were jolly good fellows, "which nobody could deny," and I liked them, every mother's son of them; but one cruise with such an incorrigible set of practical jokers was as much as I could stand. I shouldn't go through another three years of their horseplay and pranks for a farm; and you know what that means to old sailors, who invariably want to end their days raising cabbages.

No one in the wardroom felt safe. It was dangerous even to accept a cigar, especially if politely and pressingly offered; for the chances were even that it was loaded with powder and ready to go off like a fuse when the fire worked half an inch or so toward the mouth. It is a marvel that none of us lost an eye through this merry little jest. What with buckets of water poised over the door of your stateroom, empty bottles laid on your floor to roll round at sea and make you turn out to pick them up, doors unhooked and banging with every lurch of the ship, salt in your sugar, dead mice in your bunk, etc., existence was little more than one long purgatory.

When I found that my remonstrances availed nothing, I made up my mind to fight the devil with fire, and devoted most of my spare moments to devising ways of getting even with the gang, of which Donovan was easily chief imp. If I couldn't have peace, at least I should have diversion; but I never went outside the gang, and paid most of my attentions to Donovan himself.

NOT so, however, with McAllister, junior watch, a quiet, well behaved ensign, who had just been commissioned, exceedingly matter of fact, and standing greatly in awe of his seniors in the mess. As he never complained and never resented, he speedily became the butt of the diabolically ingenious schemes of the "banditti." What the poor chap suffered I can surmise from my own milder and less frequent experiences; but he neither squealed nor squirmed, taking everything as it came as in the day's work. I pitied him from the bottom of my heart, urged him to retaliate, and begged Donovan to let the boy alone.

"He's a sheep; has no sand at all; deserves all he gets!" such was the substance of Donovan's reply.

The latter was evidently piqued by McAllister's non-resistance; for after awhile I perceived a change in his manner toward his victim, a sharpening of tone, and a disposition to snap McAllister up on the rare occasions when he ventured to speak at table. Taking it as serious, I wondered at the new turn to their relations, which was bound, I felt, to lead to trouble; but one day I caught Donovan smiling at one of his mates as he referred sneeringly to some expression fairly wrung from poor McAllister, and I perceived that a fresh plot was hatching. Exactly what was its nature, I could not guess. The gang would give me no light, only evasive answers followed by a suppressed chuckle; so I kept my weather eye peeled, confident that the upshot, whatever it might be, would prove interesting to all of us, to say the least.

The crisis came in Coquimbo, Chile, at dinner a week or so later, when Donovan so far forgot himself as openly to criticize something McAllister had done on the way from Valparaiso, no less than alleging that McAllister had taken in the tolgillant sail in real libidinous fashion.

"Excuse me, Mr. Donovan," the latter politely remarked. "The wind was blowing fresh enough to make us reef topsail at once, as you seem to forget. In the circumstances, it was right to cut down before lunging up."

"Do you dare, Sir," with great heat, which all present but McAllister knew to be assumed, "to question my superior knowledge of seamanship?"



"You Are a Brave Man, and I Honor You!" Donovan Exclaimed.

"Not at all, Sir; but I think you would have done the same thing yourself in my place."

"But I have just told you I wouldn't. You must retract your words and apologize. Do you understand, Sir? Apologize at once!"

To our amazement, McAllister's face took on an expression of dogged firmness as he answered with dignity and yet with the utmost courtesy, "There is nothing whatever in my words to give offense, Mr. Donovan. As there was no intention of offending, there is no occasion for an apology. Since what I said was true, I am unable to withdraw it."

"By Gad, Sir—" he retorted, and if Donovan was not really furious, he certainly looked so to the rest of us; but the mess president, who ought to have stopped the controversy at the very beginning, here interposed his authority and brought the mess to order. The meal was finished in a graveyard silence, as you may suppose.

That evening a formal challenge was sent by Donovan, and immediately accepted by McAllister. The necessary preliminaries were arranged for a meeting next day. To my surprise, Donovan sent me a message to the effect that he would like me on hand "to help keep off any crowd." Hoping that I might be able to put an end to this foolish business, even at the last moment, I consented gladly.

McAllister spent the evening writing letters to his mother and sweetheart, if he had one, as I take it for granted. With Donovan I labored long and earnestly, endeavoring to induce him to retract his unkind strictures on McAllister; but he was obstinate. I could do nothing with him. McAllister naturally could not now back out.

AT dawn next morning we pulled ashore to the sandy beach that lies east of the town. Besides the principals, the seconds, and an assistant surgeon, I found that practically all the gang were along, ostensibly for the same purpose as myself. A good site for the duel had been found, and a prettier spot for a cozy picnic cannot be conceived. To our right, a couple of miles distant, lay the city of Coquimbo, nestling against the hills that protect it from the Pacific Ocean, its buildings of varying tints bathed in the soft, early light. Beyond, the smoke hung dark and menacing over the smelters of San Rosario, the one discordant feature in the quiet, peaceful landscape. Farms and orchards stretched away to the south, while in the east was the picturesque old town of La Serena, with the lofty, snow-tipped peaks of the Andes towering above it in the far distance. Above this jagged skyline the sun's disk was beginning to peep. We stood on a lovely green sward and were fairly well concealed by some algarroba trees and palms from the highway between Coquimbo and La Serena, which, avoiding the beach where we had landed, runs some little distance inland. It seemed to me a pity to violate the sanctity of so charming and restful a nook; but you know how it is when the passions are aroused; nothing is then sacred.

Both while going ashore in the boat and after we had reached the spot selected for the duel, I strove with Donovan and the two seconds, hoping that an adjustment might be reached that would be honorable to the principals; but my pleading fell on deaf ears. I had only the satisfaction of having done my best as peace-maker. Donovan insisted that blood alone would wipe out the affront, and of course the first concession must come from him.

The distance, twenty yards, was paced off by the

seconds, who drew lots for choice of position. It fell to Donovan's, who named the inshore end of the line, so that McAllister should stand out boldly against the blue waters of the bay. The pistols—old-fashioned, navy, single muzzleloaders throwing a huge round ball (it must have weighed an ounce or more)—were then produced and loaded by the seconds.

All this while McAllister stood apart as if in a trance, his eyes fixed on vacancy and his lips moving; but in no respect did his attitude suggest fear. Donovan was in the best of spirits, talking in subdued tones to his friends, and even smiling a bit. I was forced to admire his nerve and nonchalance under such trying conditions.

The principals were now given their weapons and led to their places, facing away from each other, and Jones, who was to give the fatal word to fire, repeated the rules in a clear voice.

I SHALL count one, two, three. At the word three, you are to turn and fire as soon as you please. Do you understand?"

"Yes," from Donovan promptly.

"Yes," from McAllister, less quickly and as if speaking softly to himself.

"Are you ready, Gentlemen?" continued Jones.

Donovan answered at once in the affirmative; but McAllister, who seemed at the question to awaken from a deep sleep and suddenly to realize the situation, said in apologetic tone but with no sign of trepidation:

"I'm very sorry to give trouble; but I was thinking of certain matters," here he hesitated a moment, "at home—and I did not notice what was going on. I didn't see the pistols loaded, and as I am sure of these pistols only when I load them myself, I hope you'll excuse a little delay. I ought to have spoken sooner, I know; but it is not too late yet."

With that, and before anyone could reply, he discharged his weapon into the bay and coolly reloaded it with powder, bullet, and cap he had, unknown even to his second, brought ashore with him in his pockets. The operation was watched with breathless interest by all. I was merely surprised, for such a procedure was without precedent and wholly irregular in dueling practice, and I wondered at the silence of his second in permitting it; but a look of horror had come over the faces of the others which I did not understand and shall never forget.

The spell was broken by McAllister's clearly and firmly uttered "I am ready!"

BUT with that Donovan threw his pistol on the ground and rushed toward McAllister, exclaiming, "You are a brave man, McAllister. I honor you. And so do we all, and we all beg your pardon for the joke we thought to play on you. The pistols were loaded only with bread balls, and neither of us would have been hurt if hit. Please forgive me—or, if you like, take a shot at me, anyhow. I deserve to be winged, if not killed—and I'll be hanged if I can bring myself to fire back at the pluckiest fellow I know! Anyhow, you won't be bothered again on board the *Ossawatomie*. I say, McAllister, be a good chap and forget all this child's foolishness! We were only in fun."

For a few moments McAllister's face was deathly pale, his eyes blazed with rage and contempt, and he stood speechless; but as all the gang ran toward him, holding out their hands or grasping his, in spite of his efforts to the contrary, and telling him how splendidly he had behaved in the trying situation, he gradually regained his self-possession to say deliberately but with cutting emphasis:

"Of all the wicked and cruel things I ever heard of, this is easily the worst. I can't imagine any man getting down so low," and then a quaint smile appeared at the corners of his mouth; as he added: "but you're just boy babies, I suppose. I am sure of this, however, that you're the biggest idiots in the navy."

"You're dead right, McAllister," the gang agreed, "and we need kicking. Begin now, if you feel like it; we're all ready."

"If I thought kicking would do you any good, I'd begin with Jones; but it's no use: you are too far gone in your foolish iniquity. Give me time, Fellows, and I may be able to forgive you and forget this; but I can't do so just yet."

Here Donovan and his second picked him up, not with tarding his protests and struggles, and carried him to the boat on their shoulders. By the time we got alongside the ship all were chatting quite amicably, almost as if nothing untoward had occurred; but a genuine note of admiration and affection was evident in whatever he was addressed to the hero of the occasion, for, even if he did not right it, McAllister had certainly won his first and only duel.